

lead, if everything works out, the district might choose to stick with the park district. The park

will be middle schoolers who will no longer have football, wrestling and track.

## Walden's fire bill is heating up

**T**hey say where there's smoke there's fire. Let's hope they're right, at least with respect to the so-called "Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003."

The legislation, sponsored by representatives Greg Walden, R-Ore., and Scott McInnis, R-Col., sure looks hot: As of Wednesday, it had more than 100 co-sponsors. That's a lot. In fact, the number of sponsors represents about half the number of votes needed for passage, a statistic Walden considers a good sign. The bill has made it out of committee and will come to the House floor sometime next week.

Those of us who live amid heavily forested federal land have an interest in its fate. The bill would significantly reduce the time needed to plan and implement the sorts of forest treatments that prevent wildfires like those that raced through many Western states last summer. Time would be saved, for instance, by limiting the amount of analysis forest officials would have to conduct on projects carried out under the act's auspices. The law also would light a fire of sorts under courts handling legal challenges.

Naturally, the bill will continue to attract criticism from those who don't

want anyone doing anything in the forest. We doubt, however, that they'll acknowledge the fact that it focuses on areas in which fire poses a particular threat to humans and endangered species, that it still allows plenty of opportunity for public involvement, or that its lifespan is quite limited. The Healthy Forests Restoration Act allows for the treatment of only 20 million acres. We say "only" because, according to federal land managers, conditions in about 190 million acres of federal forest land are so unhealthy that catastrophic wildfire and insect and disease infestations are at high risk. Treating 20 million acres is only a start.

To move beyond that start, federal land managers will have to monitor the projects carried out under the act and demonstrate good results. "If it works, we'll do a lot more," says James Connaughton, chairman of the White House Council on Environmental quality. Eventually, he says, "we'll put ourselves on a path where we're reducing firefighting costs." And those are nothing to sneeze at. Last year, Uncle Sam spent well over \$1 billion fighting fires.

Speaking of sneezing — and coughing — fire season is just around the corner, and by all accounts it'll probably be a bad one.

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